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UNDINE

A POEM

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UNDINE

UNDINE

A POEM

ADAPTED IN PART FROM THE ROMANCE BY
DE LA MOTTE FOUQUÉ

BY

ANTOINETTE DE COURSEY PATTERSON

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BY A. DE C. PATTERSON

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TO

I. DE C.

FOREWORD

Since earliest childhood I have felt the charm of De La Motte Fouqué's story of Undine; but in later years, re-reading the tale, it seemed to me he had somewhat over-crowded the stage. And so I wrote this poem, narrowing the number of characters to the fewest possible, while realizing that all that was best in the verses was due primarily to M. Fouqué.

A. De C. P.

UNDINE

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A POEM ADAPTED IN PART FROM THE ROMANCE BY DE LA MOTTE FOUQUÉ

The interior of a fisherman's cottage, one window looking on the sea, the other on the Enchanted Forest.

THE FISHERMAN'S WIFE

How wild the night is, Husband, and the waves
Roll mountain high! Dire news the morn will bring.

THE FISHERMAN (*resignedly*)

We fisher-folk inherit watery graves.
Lives must end somehow:—pain and suffering
Come with our birth. But listen! There's a cry
Like a young child's.

The Fisherman opens the door and reveals a little girl in tears. The tears change into happy laughter.

UNDINE

I thought some one would come
To let me in! It's cold out here, and I
Am all alone, and strange. My hands
are numb—
I'll warm them at your fire. I'm hungry, too—
I'd like a little cake and cup of tea—
That cup up there, of pretty green and
blue!

Undine points to a cupboard. Immediately the best cup and saucer is taken down. After Undine has supped she again addresses her hosts.

And now make up a little bed for me;
I'm tired and sleepy in a funny way—
Such as I think I never was before!

THE FISHERMAN'S WIFE

First tell us where you come from, child,
I pray.

UNDINE

I know not:—only this, that to your door
A great wave brought me. Ah, I like
it here,

And I am going to stay, and be your child!

She throws herself lightly upon a hastily made cot, and in a moment is fast asleep.

THE FISHERMAN'S WIFE (*making the sign of the cross over her*)

No one has taught her how to pray, I fear,
But when I made the blessèd sign, she smiled.

The same cottage ten years later. Sir Huldbrand of Ringstettin, who has just ridden through the Enchanted Forest, begs of the Fisherman and his wife entertainment for the night.

SIR HULDBRAND

Kind Folks, I do beseech of you a bed
Where I may sleep in peace, ere I return
The way I came. At night such spectres dread
Infest those woods, that every tree and fern
Seems to vibrate with presences malign.

THE FISHERMAN

You're more than welcome to our poor abode:
Be seated while we bring you bread and wine.
Your coming serves to lift from us the load
Of loneliness we sometimes feel, my wife
And I, and our sole child, the little one

Who, years ago now, came into our life
In strangest way; brought here indeed by none
But the great sea itself!

Suddenly, though the moon is shining, there is a dash of water against the window. The Fisherman continues, apologetically.

Ah! that's Undine!—
Full of wild tricks as ever, since the night
She first came to us. All our care has been
To tame this little wildling, but a sprite
She seems, although with a most loving heart.

He calls sternly at the window:

Undine, Undine, can't thou for once be still!
Beside our hearth a stranger sits. Depart,
I beg of thee,—or come in, if thy will.

There is another splash on the window, followed by a sound of silvery laughter. Then Undine appears. She does not see Huldbrand. Turning to her foster-father, she stamps her foot and cries:

I knew that thou wert making game of
me,
There's no one here!

Sir Huldbrand, dazzled by her young, fair beauty, comes forward.

Ah, but this time I'm wrong.
I pray you, Sir, be seated. I shall be
Quiet as one could wish. The hours
seemed long
To-day, but now they will have swiftest
wings.

She draws up a little cricket beside the knight.

You must have come through yonder
woods and dales,—
I'd like to hear of your strange happen-
ings.

THE FISHERMAN'S WIFE (*annoyed at such coldness*)

The night is no fit time to hear such
tales!

UNDINE (*springing to her feet*)

Nay, but it is my will the tales to hear!

THE FISHERMAN'S WIFE

Undine, thou art a most unruly child!
Go to thy room, and do not thou appear
Again 'til thou hast curbed thy temper wild.

Undine opens the door and darts into the night. The sound of a mighty wind rises, followed by the roar of waters. The moon goes out like a candle. The Fisherman quickly lights a lantern, but Huldbrand takes it from him.

HULDBRAND

My friend, this tempest needeth younger blood
To cope with it in all its rising strength.
Mark how the sea hath risen, for the flood
Is even at your doorway!

He starts to ford the torrent.

Now at length
I know what love means, for I know despair!
Death may already have her in its hold,
That child! I thought above the waters there
I caught a glimpse of tresses spun of gold.

Huldbrand reaches a small island sheltered by thick trees from the storm. He hears a ripple of laughter, and, to his amazement, finds Undine. The moon appears again.

UNDINE (*winding her arms about the knight's neck*)

Here will I listen to thee;—far away
From noise of scolding tongues, and angry eyes
That do reprove me all the night and day!
Here will I kiss thee, 'til the moonlight dies.
For the first time I know what kisses are!
Winged things—flame-tipped—and with the strength to bear
The spirit upward to that farthest star;—
And then beyond—to—ah, I know not where!

HULDBRAND (*after returning her tender caresses*)

Meanwhile, dear Child, two other hearts must ache
With fear lest any harm has come to thee.

UNDINE

I care not in the least if they should break!
Yet somehow just thy wish seems law for me.
I will go home, if thou wilt but remain
Beside me. See, already dawn is here.
Thy tales they 'll hear now without fear of bane.
Ah, the great joy of feeling thee so near!

The foster-parents, relieved at Undine's safe return, make no further objection when she again demands from Huldbrand a recital of his recent experiences.

HULDBRAND

Mine was a restless spirit, so I went
To the Imperial City first, to seek
Adventure. And I found it there and spent
Most freely of my substance! Many a week
Two bright black eyes helped hold me, eyes like flame,
Which burned for me alone, so gossip said,

Praising the while that most fair lady's
name.
At her request through these wild woods
I sped,
Which in my mem'ry ever will be fraught
With horror of strange sound and stranger
sight;
Of rushing water, while a creature caught
And held me in its arms so cold and white,
Until my very heart seemed to congeal.
I thought at last death had me in its thrall,
My head swam and I could no longer feel;
When lo!—the *thing* proved but a water-
fall!
I had the promise, if I safe returned,
My fair one would reward me with her
glove.

Huldbrand is suddenly conscious of a sharp pain in the hand next to Undine. He finds she has bitten it almost to the bone. He continues, quickly but quietly.

But yet my heart before I went had
spurned
All thoughts of her proud beauty and her
love —
I only wished my courage bold to prove.

Huldbrand looks steadily at Undine, who returns his gaze, and then without a word goes to her room.

Huldbrand falls asleep, to dream continuously of the beautiful girl. But curious questionings mingle with his dreams.

HULDBRAND

Her eyes with changefu lights and shadows gleam;
Like rippling water is her laughter clear;
But though she doth illumine every dream,
My heart is burdened with the strangest fear.
Is she a water-sprite or human child—
More light she is, more lovely than a fay—
If I should wed her, would she prove a mild
And loving wife—or turn to foamy spray?

In spite of these suspicions, the knight lingers at the cottage, and finally, when a priest comes to visit the fisher-folk, he persuades them to let him make Undine his wife. Just before the ceremony Undine seems particularly elfish.

A brave new game is this they're teaching me—
I think I'll like it! It will be more fun
Than chasing wavelets back into the sea,
Or blowing rainbow bubbles in the sun.
A brave new game, where I am called the bride.
She must be always pretty, with gold hair
As bright as mine is, coral-lipped, blue-eyed,
And with a heart that knoweth naught of care!

The next morning reveals an Undine so gentle and considerate that her foster-parents and even her husband regard her almost with awe. Before leaving for the knight's home they revisit the island which sheltered them the time of the storm.

UNDINE

When I come here the strangest memories
Flutter like white-winged moths, now here, now there:
Only on one I seem at times to seize
That tells me I was born, not of the air
Nor of the earth, but of the wave;—a sprite
Who cared for me wished I might have a soul,
Which could not come unless I should unite
My being with a mortal's. You control
Me now. You gave me soul as well as name.
But with it must earth's sorrow also go?
I know not. Only I 'm no more the same

Light-hearted child, once free as winds
that blow,
Glad as the fish that dart like tiny fires
Through lake and river, loving just their
life,
So free of care and these new strange de-
sires—
So ignorant of human pain and strife.
Will the moon some day seem all white
with pain—
The streams that I have loved made up
of tears?
Belovèd, take me to your heart again,
And stop with kisses all these haunting
fears!

HULDBRAND (*caressing his young wife tenderly, though shivering somewhat, as a huge wave, which advances threateningly toward the island, at a gesture from* UNDINE, *recedes*)

May all the powers of heaven, earth and
sea
Shield and protect thee, little bride of
mine!
Most guilty of mankind regarding me
Should I prove faithless to this trust of
thine.

Rest here, Undine, in happy confidence;
Here on my breast no terrors can affright,—
The very love of thee must drive them hence,
E'en as the day dispels the shades of night.

It is two years later. Sir Huldbrand still loves his good and beautiful wife, but the charms of the lady for whom he had once dared the Enchanted Forest have also taken hold of his impressionable nature.

UNDINE (*addressing her husband before the three set out for a row on the lake*)

This morning I have had thy men seal tight
The fountain in the courtyard, for I fear
Malicious tricks from the great Water-Sprite
Whose home within the lake is far too near.
And, Huldbrand, I must warn thee yet again—
Thou dost forget now to be always kind—
Refrain from any harsh words to me when
Upon the water. O keep this in mind!

The lady joins them. Undine sits silent in one end of the boat while the other two converse in low tones. After

a while the lady unfastens a necklace given her by Sir Huldbrand. She regards it dreamily as it drags along the waves.

THE LADY

The waters lap it 'round caressingly,
As though they thought it were a living thing;
Indeed it seemeth all alive to me,
Amid the waves there, flashing, quivering.
Each golden link in form is like a star,
Sparkling with many gems of brightest ray,—
Ah, how I love the jewel, never far
Is it from me, I wear it night and day!

A great hand, from which hang strands of seaweed, rises from the waves and, seizing the necklace, disappears with it. Its owner bursts into frightened tears.

UNDINE (*with quick solicitude*)

Poor child! Perhaps, though, I can comfort thee
And still thy grief, by offering instead

The fairest gems afforded by the sea;—
For pearls I 'll send, and coral rosy red.

Undine dips her hand into the water and in a few moments, with a smile of ineffable sweetness, extends to her rival a necklace far more exquisite. But Sir Huldbrand snatches it from her.

HULDBRAND

Must I be always troubled in this way,
Not knowing what strange thing will happen next?
Peace is an unknown word now:—since the day
I met thee has my soul been sorely vexed!
Have done with all these heathen ways of thine—
From thee and all thy brood I would be free!
This necklace with its witch-like shade and shine
I hurl with curses back into the sea!

UNDINE, *turning white as the foam itself, slips quietly over the side of the boat. After vain attempts to find her, her former companions seek the shore.*

A voice seems to follow them. It is like UNDINE'S, *but strangely muffled. Again and again it repeats the same prayer.*

THE VOICE

Belovèd, fare thee well, but O be true
To poor Undine! She fain would ever keep
Thee safe from evil they will plan to do—
The water-spirits — who know naught of sleep
When one they love endures a grievous wrong!
Be true to her, Undine, who is not dead:
Elsewise her power cannot shield thee long
And thy brief days must end in pain and dread.
Be faithful to her, as thy living wife,
For thine own sake, nor for a moment dwell
On thoughts of a new bride to cheer thy life:
Belovèd, O Belovèd, fare thee well!

And then, fainter still, as though it were but an echo, come the words:

The fountain in the courtyard keep tight
sealed.
If ever the great stone be rolled away
The strength of things unseen will be
revealed,
To crown with swiftest doom that fatal
day.

For many months Sir Huldbrand in anguish of spirit mourns his wife. Often he is consoled in dreams, but finally when he becomes betrothed to the companion of his misfortune the dreams cease. He continues, however, the mournfulest of lovers, even to the time of the wedding.

THE LADY (*on the night of their marriage*)

I must shake free of some strange influence
Which seems to compass us in baleful way.
Perchance my scorn of it might drive it thence;—
'T is worth the trying, come what evil may!

(*To one of her maidens*)

Go, have the courtyard fountain swift unsealed:
Its waters I am told have magic power;
The face they lave but once will be revealed
As fragrant and as lovely as a flower.

The fountain, at the bride's request, is unsealed. The bridegroom, in no hurry to part with his gloomy thoughts, is standing by a window in his own room thinking of his first marriage. There is a tap on his door.

HULDBRAND (*too full of fear to look around*)

Thus was *she* wont to do, so long ago,
With lightest touch. Ah, may the heavens forgive
My many sins! They seem to burn and glow,
Tormenting every moment that I live!

UNDINE (*entering*)

No longer can I save thee, for the spring
Is opened—I am here, and thou must die.

HULDBRAND

A terror grips me! I fear not the thing
Called death—I welcome it most eagerly—
Only the thought that some dread form at last
Will, with its horrid features drive me mad,

In just revenge for my neglectful past
Of her who once made life so blessed and glad.

UNDINE

Nay, Huldbrand, have no fear, for it is she,
Undine. Alas! thy life she cannot save,
But she can take it. Thus will the decree
Of the great Water-Spirit seem less grave
And dread. Look in her face again—
'T is she, Undine!

She throws her arms about her husband's neck, who lifts the white veil which enshrouds her that he may the better kiss her lips.

HULDBRAND (*in an ecstasy*)

I die in thy embrace.
Thy tears absolve me—I know naught of pain—
I only know the beauty of thy face.

UNDINE, *weeping steadily, folds the knight closely, ever more closely, in her arms. Then she lays him on a couch.*

Thy smile is lovely, as upon that night
I called thee mine!—Ah, mine oncè more
thou art!
Nothing can come between us to affright
Thy soul again, nor wound a faithful
heart.
Thou art at peace from griefs that over-
whelm,
At sweetest peace from all the haunting
fears—
Those flowers dark that blossom in love's
realm—
Belovèd, I have drowned thee with my
tears!

Undine glides softly from the room. . . . At the funeral a white figure is seen, only for a moment, kneeling at the grave. Where she had knelt, a little spring gushes forth, which, after almost encircling the mound, finally loses itself in the lake.

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